



RESULTS OF SAN ANTONIO FOCUS GROUPS: PUBLIC ACCEPTABILITY OF EXPRESS LANE OPTIONS FOR I-35

FINAL REPORT

August 24, 2005

This research was conducted by the Texas Transportation Institute as part of the Federal Highway Administration Value Pricing Pilot Program. The project name is San Antonio I-35 Northeast Corridor Value Pricing Study.

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Research Objective

The Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) conducted four focus groups in the San Antonio area in February and March 2005. The purpose of conducting these focus groups was to test people's understanding and opinions of value priced lanes – both high occupancy toll (HOT) lanes and express toll lanes. Opinions were also sought on applicability of these operating scenarios on the I-35 Northeast corridor in San Antonio. The focus group participants were recruited from a variety of locations along the I-35 Northeast corridor and typify a range of income, age, and race/ethnicity backgrounds, with a reasonable balance of gender representation. The views of the focus group participants helped shape a subsequent telephone survey.

Research Approach

Recruiting. The participants were recruited from several different areas of San Antonio. Flyers were placed in the TTI – San Antonio Castle Hills office building, the Downtown Alliance building, the Central Area Business Council office, and the Wayland Baptist University Student Center and bookstore. Additionally, flyers were mailed to several neighborhood associations. A link to focus group information was also posted on the TransGuide website. Lastly, a project advisory committee member provided a list of potential participants. These people were contacted to inquire if they were interested in participating in a focus group.

The flyers mentioned the subject, who was eligible to participate in the focus group, the amount of compensation (\$25) and a telephone contact number. When interested individuals called, a screening tool was used to select participants, (see Figure 1). The questions on the screening tool included such things as occupation, location of

residence, and age. When making final participant selections, an attempt was made to achieve diversity of age, gender, and occupation whenever possible. In many cases people had agreed to participate but then failed to attend the actual focus group.

Focus Group Screening Tool

1. Name _____

2. Daytime Phone _____

3. Evening Phone _____

4. Home Zip Code _____

5. Gender
male ☐
female ☐

6. Occupation _____

7. Primary mode of transportation:
car ☐ bus ☐ other ☐

8. Age
20 - 30 ☐ 31 - 40 ☐ 41 - 50 ☐
51 - 60 ☐ over 60 ☐

9. How often do you travel the I-35 N corridor between I-37 and Loop 1604? *(select one)*
10 or more times a week (daily commuter) ☐
5 to 10 times a week (frequent traveler) ☐
1 to 4 times a week (occassional traveler) ☐
1 to 4 times a MONTH (rarely travel I-35 N) ☐

Figure 1. Focus Group Screening Tool

Conducting the Focus Groups. Each focus group was approximately two hours in length. Three of the four focus groups were held in the evening on a weeknight. One

group was held during the daytime on a weekday. In some focus groups some of the participants knew each other. Two TTI staff were present for each focus group—the moderator and an assistant. The focus groups were audio taped and later transcribed.

The moderator consistently followed a discussion guide for each focus group. The session began with a welcome, an explanation of the purpose of the focus group, a statement of the protocol and expectations for the focus group, and introductions. Prior to beginning each focus group, the participants were asked to read and sign consent forms acknowledging that they are aware of the purpose of the focus groups and how the results will be used.

Focus Group Descriptions

Ideally, focus groups consist of the eight to 10 participants. At the outset of this project, it was anticipated that three focus groups would provide meaningful insight into the opinions of travelers in this corridor. However, due to poor turnout in the first three groups, the project team felt it was necessary to hold an additional focus group, and the intent of this group was to target additional travelers that would have a greater likelihood of traveling the entire corridor.

The Downtown Alliance Focus Group was conducted on the evening of February 22, 2005. There were three females and one male in the focus group. The ages of the focus group members varied from over 20 to over 60. One of the participants was retired, one worked for a public transportation agency, and two were in various businesses. They all traveled the I-35 study corridor more than ten times a week.

The Windcrest Focus Group was conducted during the day on February 23, 2005 at the Windcrest City Hall. This focus group consisted of residents who lived in Windcrest. The focus group was comprised of two males and one female. All of the participants were over the age of 60, two of whom were retired and one was a homemaker. Participants in this focus group traveled the I-35 study corridor once a week up to ten times a week. This focus group was chosen because of their proximity to the

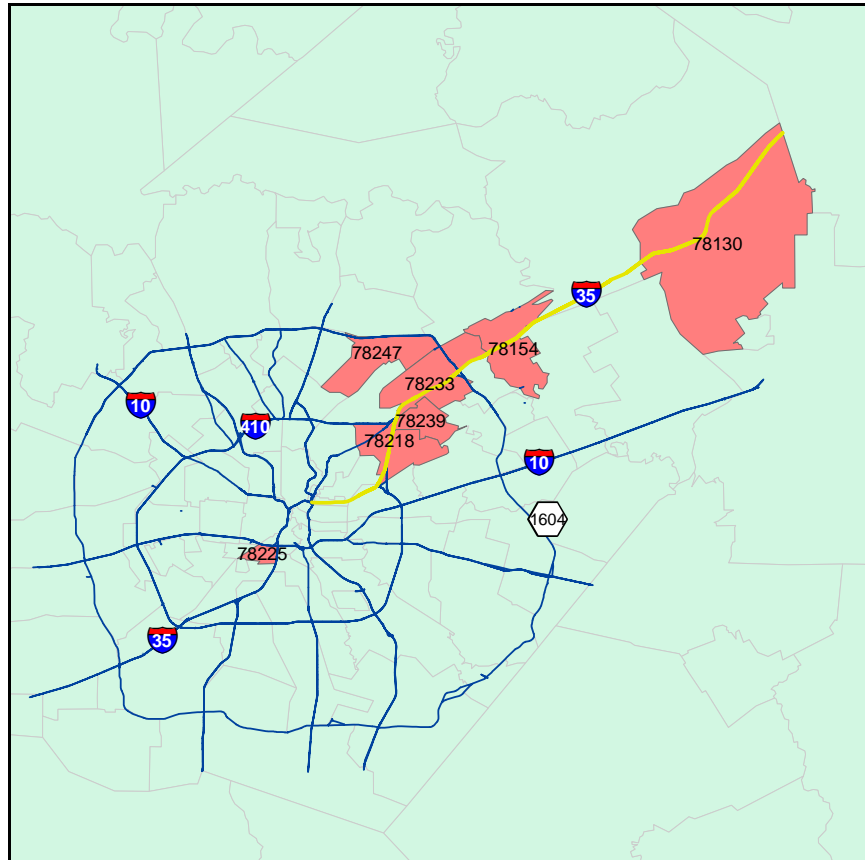
corridor and to solicit input from non-commuters in the corridor that typically travel at times other than peak periods.

A third focus group was held at Wayland Baptist University on the evening of February 23, 2005. The focus group consisted of three females and three males. All of the participants were over the age of 40 and traveled the I-35 study corridor more than ten times a week. The participants' occupation fields ranged from federal civil service to medical and real estate.

Lastly, a focus group was conducted in Universal City on March 17, 2005. Of the six participants, four were males and two were females. All of the participants were over the age of 30 and one of the group members was retired. The occupations of the participants ranged from business, government, and self-employment. One of the participants travels the I-35 corridor five to ten times a week while the remaining five travel the corridor more than ten times a week.

The map below shows the zip codes of the residences represented by the participants across all groups. The map illustrates the scattering of the origin points for commuters and drivers in the San Antonio area.

Figure 2. Participant Residence Zip Codes



Results of Focus Group Discussions

Travel Patterns and I-35 Experiences

Each focus group was asked to describe their experiences traveling along I-35 between Loop 1604 and downtown San Antonio. Participants in three of the four focus groups mentioned they adjusted their schedule to avoid the congestion along the corridor. Each focus group mentioned that the Loop 410 interchanges were confusing and caused some of the congestion. Semi-trucks were also mentioned as a major contributor to delay between Loop 1604 and Loop 410 along I-35. A member of the Universal City focus group stated, “...there seems to be a lot of truck traffic coming off the access road on to 35 and working it’s way across to get in the 410 exit. That caused a lot of problems in terms of congestion at that time of day. If there’s an accident, which there seems to be

frequent accidents in that area, it really slows it up.” One individual from the Downtown Alliance focus group mentioned they take longer alternate routes to avoid the headache of merging into I-35 traffic. Another participant from the Downtown Alliance focus group stated they know “what exits and entrances to use to get from one place to another”. A couple of people from this focus group also mentioned they did not think traffic was as bad as other major cities like Houston or Los Angeles. No one in any of the focus groups mentioned they carpooled or used transit.

Introduction to the Concept of Value Pricing

After learning the participants’ general impressions of traffic and noting their travel patterns, the concept of value pricing was introduced. None of the participants were familiar with the concept. One person from the Windcrest focus group guessed value pricing dealt with transportation and was the definition of a high occupancy lane or “the convenience of a high occupancy lane”. Most of the other participants suggested it related to selling something, the right price for their money, or toll roads. The following are examples of actual assumptions about the meaning of value pricing:

Downtown Alliance

- is a sales tool: “you’re trying to sell something”
- “how much are you paying per hour to sit in that traffic”
- “government speak”
- “using words to mean you’re going to pay someday or another”
- “car salesman; a good value for my money”

University City

- “Pricing items just right”
- “sounds like tolling”

Wayland Baptist University

- “getting the most for your money”
- “getting the best deal”
- “I smell toll-roads”

Thoughts of Value Pricing Concepts and Scenarios

The moderator then provided examples of two value priced lanes in operation today, the State Route 91 (SR 91) Express Lanes in Orange County, California and the I-15 HOT lanes in San Diego, California. The operations of each of these facilities were explained to the focus group and their feedback was solicited. The participants were asked to provide their initial reactions without regard to implementing either of these projects in San Antonio.

There was considerable confusion on how a project like this might operate. The participants were shown graphic representations of a project with elevated lanes that might be value priced lanes as well as graphical illustrations of how electronic toll collection could work on the facility. The participants were asked to comment specifically on the express toll lane concept and the HOT lane concept. Most felt that offering an incentive for carpooling and transit use was a good idea although most did not feel they were in a position to take advantage of those options due to time commitments and family constraints. There was some skepticism among some participants about the ability to keep the managed lanes free flowing. There was some concern about enforcement, especially occupancy enforcement. Additionally, the idea of dynamic pricing was strongly opposed in each of the focus groups. Most participants also felt that the price of tolls paid, up to \$ 8.00, on the example projects in California were “outrageous” and did not believe anyone in San Antonio would be willing to pay that much.

The participants were then asked what they thought of each concept and its applicability to the I-35 Northeast corridor in San Antonio. In general, the focus groups had mixed views on the concept. Two of focus groups stated San Antonio was not to a point where they needed value priced lanes. The participants did agree that having the option to use express lanes might eventually be a good idea. Some individuals believed it would be a good idea if there was the option to avoid congestion. Two of the focus groups were concerned that the “free lanes” would not be maintained. One participant from the Wayland Baptist University focus group echoed the concerns of many

participants by saying, “a massive San Antonio super project would best be spent resolving all the existing problems.” This was a recurring theme among the focus groups. Many felt that this was not right fix for San Antonio at this time and that the money would be better spent addressing some of the design issues on I-35, especially at the Loop 410 cut-off.

Another common theme was the need to address the truck traffic on I-35. In fact, a few participants mentioned that it might be more useful for the managed lanes to be truck-only lanes. Some also brought up the idea of ‘double taxation’, but many thought that it would be a good idea as an alternative to sitting in traffic.

Potential Use of Value Priced Lanes

When asked if they would use value priced lanes if implemented the participants replied they might if the “price was right”. Price would be the deciding factor in this decision for most of the focus groups. One Windcrest focus group member stated, “.because we’ve also agreed that the high occupancy lanes are desirable, and I am willing to pay for that convenience.” A couple of participants from the Universal City focus group said they would use it on a regular basis if it was convenient and made their commute quicker. While the Wayland Baptist University focus group stated they would not use it unless it was necessary and it was not too expensive. A few participants from this focus group also said they would definitely not use it if the toll amount varied. Access to the express lanes was a concern with participants whose trips were primarily inside Loop 1604. They were unsure whether or not it would be worth their time to back track to get on the facility.

HOT Lane Concept vs. Express Toll Concept

All focus groups were asked if they preferred the idea of HOT lanes (free HOV travel) or express toll lanes (all travelers pay a toll). All of the focus groups were in favor of HOT lanes over express toll lanes because it would reward or encourage carpooling and public transportation. The Wayland Baptist University focus group mentioned they were in support of HOT lanes; however; express toll lanes would be easier to enforce.

The Wayland Baptist University focus group also mentioned there should be a convenient method for drivers to acquire the toll tag. They suggested roadside kiosks, convenience stores and even area hotels as possible locations to sell toll tags. Since San Antonio draws large tourist traffic, many believed that the idea of all-electronic toll collection would not help congestion. Most believe that tourist drivers should have the option of entering the toll lanes without having to acquire the toll tag. The Windcrest focus group preferred HOT lanes but mentioned they would not carpool because none of the participants commute to work on a regular basis. The other focus groups also support the HOT lane concept but indicated they were also not likely to carpool.

There was considerable confusion between the two concepts among each of the focus groups. As noted before, each focus group favored providing an added incentive to carpoolers and transit users yet when asked which option they would prefer for San Antonio, they responded with the express toll lanes because everyone would be able to use them. This demonstrates the lack of understanding and confusion about the operating scenarios.

Use of Toll Revenue

Participants were asked what they thought should be done with the revenue collected from the tolls. All of the focus groups responded that the revenue should be reinvested in local transportation projects. The Windcrest focus group was the only group, which felt it would be all right if the revenue was used in more regional projects, perhaps extending to Austin, because the entire region would be using the toll road, “They’re going to be through traffic. So those people going to Austin are paying for it, so let them improve all the way up to Austin.”

Enforcement

The issue of video enforcement of the lanes was of limited concern in all of the focus groups. Some focus groups voiced concern about electronic enforcement being used for purposes other than tolling such as speeding. However, overall there was not much apprehension about the issue. One participant in the Universal City focus group

stated, “It is a privacy issue, but you got a choice. You can either move with everybody, or be left behind.”

Equity

The question of equity was brought up during the focus groups. For the Windcrest focus group, there was concern for businesses along the study corridor. They felt drivers would not stop at commercial or retail businesses along the corridor because of the limited access points. The other focus groups addressed the effects tolling would have on lower income drivers. There was general agreement among the focus groups that wealthy drivers would use the facility more often than lower income drivers but that it would be beneficial for everyone to have a choice. There were some questions as to lower income drivers’ ability to acquire a transponder if it required a deposit and a link to a credit card. Overall, equity was not a major concern for any of the focus groups.

Impressions of TxDOT’s Toll Messages

Lastly, the moderator provided some basic information on why TxDOT is considering tolling as a financing mechanism. The moderator explained how transportation funding has occurred in the past and how that has led to the current shortfall. It was apparent in each of the focus groups that there is very little to no understanding of transportation funding or how roads are financed at every level, from local streets to interstate highways. After the brief explanation, most participants had a somewhat better understanding. Additionally, they perceived how bonding a project could allow it to be completed faster than the traditional method. Likewise, there was an understanding of how the current system perpetuates the problem. However, many expressed a mistrust of how toll revenues would be spent. Many often cited the case of the Texas lottery being used to fund public education and how that has been unsuccessful. There was a feeling that this would be the case if they agreed to tolling as well. Most felt that TxDOT and/or the government could not be trusted to use the revenue appropriately. For instance, a few participants indicated that it would be in the best interest of TxDOT to have drivers take the toll road therefore, TxDOT would stop maintaining the free roads in an effort to force people on to the toll roads.

Conclusions

- *Concern with Current Problems* - The focus groups revealed that all participants had experiences traveling on the I-35 Northeast corridor. Most of their views on that section of interstate were unflattering. This was primarily a result of current conditions on the facility, such as left-hand exits, and the extensive truck traffic from major distribution centers along the route. All the focus groups agreed the congestion was frustrating; however, their opinions differed on how to solve the problem. A few participants believed the money should be spent fixing the current problems instead of constructing more lanes. Others felt constructing additional lanes would help alleviate some of the congestion, especially as the population grows. They were in favor of promoting carpooling and public transportation.
- *Lack of Understanding of Value Pricing* - The focus group participants had little to no knowledge of value pricing. Several guesses were made regarding the meaning and most presumed it dealt with selling something. One participant guessed it had to do with high occupancy lanes. After an explanation of the concept opinion varied on what they thought about the concept for the I-35 Northeast corridor. Some felt San Antonio was not ready for value priced lanes yet, while others liked the idea of having an option to avoid congestion. The price of the toll was the deciding factor of whether the participants would use the lanes or not. They all agreed it depended on how much their time was worth and that would depend on individual circumstances that may vary from day to day. All participants were opposed to variable pricing and strongly opposed to dynamic pricing. One participant indicated it would be like opening your electric bill every month, ...”you never know what it will be.” Even after the explanation the participants were clearly confused on how dynamic or variable tolling would be used on the facility.
- *General Agreement on Use of Toll Revenue* – Participants of each of the focus groups agreed toll revenue should be reinvested for local transportation projects

but also expressed reservations that toll revenues would actually be used for this purpose. One group felt some of the revenue could be spent on regional projects because local drivers would not be the only ones paying tolls. The participants responded with little concern over video enforcement and equity of value priced lanes.

- *Extensive Public Education Required* - It is apparent from the focus groups that any operating strategy that is implemented in this corridor will require extensive public education. It will also be necessary for the implementing agency to very clearly outline how a value priced project will operate, answering basic questions such as, “where do I get a toll tag?, how does it work?, and what happens if I get on without a toll tag?”. It will be beneficial for TxDOT to develop a public outreach plan that outlines the reasons that toll options are being explored. It should begin with a clear explanation of the current funding situation and demonstrate how tolling can be used to accelerate projects. The plan should also detail exactly how and where toll revenues will be used.
- *Agreement that Tolling Can Accelerate Projects* – After a brief explanation, participants had a clearer understanding of how transportation projects are financed and how tolling could accelerate a project. Clearly outlining the project delivery process will give the public a better understanding of the options that tolling provides. It will be useful if this information can be quantified and the benefits highlighted. For example, developing a project schedule for a traditionally funded project versus a toll funded project may generate support for the toll option. Additionally, it may be useful to demonstrate what the congestion experience would be if the project were delayed due to a lack of funding.

APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

I. Introduction (10 mins.)

Have participants sign consent forms.

Welcome to the focus group today. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to talk with us. I'd like to begin by telling you about how the group will work and then we'll get down to the specifics of our topic for the day.

How many of you have participated in a focus group before?

The success of the group depends quite a bit on how willing you are to share with us what you think. So, I'm asking you right up front to be open and forthcoming, and not to worry about what I might think, or what others in the group might think about what you say, or even if you are giving a viewpoint that disagrees with someone else's. We're not really talking today about matters that would be considered very sensitive, but the topic is one that we would expect people to have differing opinions or ideas, so I do want to encourage lots of dialogue. Don't worry about the tape recorder. We will keep the tape to ourselves and just use it to help us with our notes. Try to forget that it's there. Let me assure you that we will always keep everything you say anonymous.

Having said that, I want you to relax and enjoy the conversation. But I do have to ask that you talk one-at-a-time, that you not have any side conversations, and you speak loudly so that everyone can hear what each person has to say. I don't expect our discussion to last more than about an hour and a half. If you need to get more refreshments or use the facilities around the hall, please feel free to get up at any time.

First I'd like us to have some brief introductions. I'll start with us...

Now, let's go around the room and say your first name only (because we're keeping this anonymous), and a little bit about who you are, where you live and what you do for a living and just a little bit about your commute to work if you do commute.

OK, now we're ready to get on with the topic at hand. TTI has a research project funded by the Texas Department of Transportation, TXDOT, and the Federal Highway Administration. The objective of this study is to evaluate possible operating strategies for improvements to I-35.

We're going to start by discussing your travel on I-35. Tell me a little about how you perceive the traffic in this corridor. Do you usually drive alone or do you sometimes carpool or take transit? If you do carpool or take the bus, how often do you do that?

II. Introducing the Value Pricing Concept (15 mins.)

Have you ever heard of value pricing? What do you think it is? Have you ever been out to dinner for the early-bird special? This is a kind of value pricing because you get a better value for coming to the restaurant when it's not so busy. The restaurant owners have extra room at that time of day so they can charge less. During the busy times and

demand is high they can charge more. Much like hotels during the peak and off-peak seasons. It's a way to smooth out the demand. This same principle is being tested on roadways in an attempt to smooth or spread the demand. Let me give you an example of this. SR 91 in California is a freeway with really bad congestion especially in the peak. Toll express lanes were constructed in the middle of the freeway. The lanes have very limited access. In the case of SR 91 you get on in one place and you can't get off until the end; this is about 10 miles. Tolls are charged to travel in these lanes. However, the toll varies according to the time you travel. The toll is higher during the times when the freeway is most congested. The tolls range from \$.50 to over \$ 5.00. Traffic in the toll express lanes is always free flowing while the free lanes are often jammed.

What do you think of this idea of Express lanes? Do you think you would take advantage of this if you had the option? What don't you like about it?

Have you ever heard of HOT lanes? HOT stands for High Occupancy Toll. In this scenario, people that are carpooling with the minimum number of people in their car can travel on the express lanes for free or at a reduced rate. Describe I-15 in San Diego.

What do you think of this idea? If this option were available to you do you think you would use it? Would you use it as single driver or would you carpool to receive a discount or free travel?

III. Introducing the Project (25 mins.) BOTH OPTIONS

Now I want you to think about how these 2 scenarios might work in the I-35 corridor. Look at the map so you can see what the project limits are. The entire corridor is about 13 or 14 miles long. TxDOT has previously completed a feasibility study to determine the needs for corridor based on traffic growth projections. This study recommended expanding the corridor to a total of 14 lanes consisting of four general purpose lanes in each direction (this adds a lane to the 3 that are already there) and three barrier-separated Express Lanes for a total of 7 lanes in each direction. Here's how it might look.

Show Cross-section and pictures. This cross-section is an illustration of how the lanes are to be configured. These other pictures are examples of how the project might look after it's constructed – it would be an elevated structure over the lanes that are there now.

I'd like to know your thoughts about this proposal. But first let me give you a little more information about the proposal. The proposed Express Lanes (3 in each direction) may operate as Express Lanes or as HOT lanes where HOVs, that is people with the required number of people in their car and buses would be free. Solo drivers would pay to use the express lanes.

What do you think about this idea? Which concept do you like better, the Express lanes or the HOT lanes?

What if the toll varied based on the congestion in the Express lanes like in the SR 91 example or the I-15 example?

Do you think the Express Lanes would be effective in reducing congestion? Why or why not?

The toll would be collected by an electronic device called a transponder. *Show graphic.* Typically, a motorist opens an account tied to a credit or debit card and is issued a transponder. As the vehicle travels under the reader, the amount of the toll is deducted from the account.

What do you think of this idea for the I-35 corridor? What do you think if you are required to have a transponder to travel on the lanes? Would you use them or not use them because of the transponder?

I want to talk briefly about enforcement on the Express lanes. Some type of video enforcement would most likely be used on the lanes. So for instance, if you passed a reader and your transponder wasn't read then that would trigger a camera that would take a picture of your license plate and you could be issued a citation by mail.

What do you think of this type of enforcement? Would you avoid the Express lanes because of this enforcement? Why or why not?

IV. Behavior Changes due to Express Lanes (10 mins.)

Now, let's talk specifically about the Express Lane option, where everybody pays to use the lanes. The lanes are typically not congested and you can travel freely. If this option were available to you, would you pay to use it? Why or why not? How much would you pay to use it? How often do you think you would use it?

Who else do you think would use it? Do you think trucks would use it?

V. Behavior Changes due to HOT Lanes (10 mins.)

We've discussed whether or not you or others would use the Express lanes. Now I would like to think about the lanes with the HOT lane operating strategy. Remember we discussed that the lanes give preferential treatment to carpoolers or transit. If this were the case, would you use the HOT lanes?

Would you carpool or take transit or pay as a solo motorist?

Who do you think would use the HOT lanes? Why or why not?

VI. Equity (10 mins.)

We've discussed 2 possible operating scenarios for the Express lanes. In either case tolls would be collected. The toll revenue that is collected could then be used to pay for improvements in the corridor.

Do you think this is a fair use of the money? Why or why not?

What if the money was used for other transportation improvements in the region – do think this is a fair use of the money? Why or why not?

Now, just focusing on the Express lanes scenario, do you think any particular group is more affected than another? Does this scenario benefit or hurt one particular group more than another?

What if the operating strategy were HOT lanes?

VII. Debriefing (10 mins.)

We've received a lot of good information and your initial impressions of these ideas. I'd like to spend just a few minutes now giving you some basic information about why TxDOT is exploring some of these options. You may have heard about the funding shortfall that is facing the department. Roads have traditionally been paid for on a "pay as you go" basis, in other words, the roads were built once all the money to pay for construction was in hand. However, due to the state's increasing population and the overwhelming demand for new or expanded roadways, especially in the urban areas, the method is not an effective means to get projects on the ground soon enough. For instance, this project we have been discussing couldn't be completed for 30 years if financed in the traditional way. Tolling is one of the new mechanisms that can deliver projects faster. Toll roads and toll lanes can be financed through bonds and then the toll revenues can be used to pay off the bonds. The result is a project that can be built much sooner than the traditional method. The I-35 project could be completed in 7 years with toll financing. Additionally, by paying for the road with toll revenues it frees up money that the department can then use for other local projects.

I want to give you all an opportunity now to ask any questions about the project or transportation financing in general. Does anyone have any questions?

IV. Summary/Final Words (5 mins.)

I would like to thank you again for taking time out of your busy schedules. I will remind you that all of your comments will be kept anonymous. I'm passing out a form that you need to sign indicating that you have received your money for participating.